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Varieties of US Post-Cold War Imperialism: Anatomy of a Failed Hegemonic Project and the Future of US Geopolitics

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Abstract

Seeking to understand the variations of US post-Cold War imperialism, this article offers an explanation of the changes that have taken place in US geopolitical strategy since the early 2000s. Our central argument is that to make sense of these changes *within* underlying continuities we need to analyse the dialectical interplay between political agency -- in turn linked to specific social forces -- on the one hand, and changing structural conditions within the global political economy on the other. Adopting a neo-Gramscian approach we argue how geopolitical strategy is constructed through a

network of actors whose practices are shaped by their own social positions as well as by the broader global structural context. Analysing these networks with Social Network Analysis we show how neoconservative intellectuals -- linked to dominant sections of US capital -- came to formulate a hegemonic project for the preservation of US primacy in the context of the rising contradictions of US-led neoliberal globalization. The ultimate failure of this hegemonic project, especially its failure to address the shortcomings of the still hegemonic neoliberal accumulation strategy, subsequently set the structural context in which the network around President Obama is now trying to formulate a more effective strategy.

Key Words

US imperialism, geopolitical strategy, neoconservative networks, hegemonic projects, Obama administration, social network analysis.

Introduction

'Change, yes we can!' has proven to be a winning slogan in US politics. The question to which extent President Obama is indeed effectuating a significant change with regard to the role of the US within the current world order -- breaking with his predecessor who himself has been associated with a radical shift in US strategy -- continues to be disputed. Whereas some stress what they see as fundamental change, a view that was of course expressed most emphatically by the Norwegian Nobel Committee, others emphasize continuity (cf. Lynch and Singh, 2008). A similar question has also been central to a recent academic debate about the extent to which a 'new' US imperialism has been emerging since 9/11. In this article, we argue that indeed important underlying continuities can be discerned within US geopolitical strategy since the end of the Cold, but that we also need to recognize and be able to explain

the changes that have taken place *within* those continuities. We are thus interested in *explaining* the variations of US post-Cold War geopolitical strategy. More specifically, in this article we seek to explain those changes that have taken place in the early 2000s under the Bush presidency, while extending this analysis to the Obama presidency in what necessarily has to remain a preliminary assessment. Our central argument is that if we want to make sense of the ‘changes within continuity’ we need to analyse the dialectical interplay between political agency – which we see as rooted specific social forces -- on the one hand, and changing structural conditions, inherent within the global political economy, on the other. We see this political agency as embedded in particular class structures and operating within and constituting links between the state apparatus, policy planning groups, and the corporate world (cf. Domhoff, 2009).

Drawing upon a historical materialist understanding of geopolitics that sees interstate relations and rivalry as internally related to capitalist social relations, geopolitical strategy is here understood as to include geo-economic strategy. Whereas geopolitical strategy is often primarily identified with territorial power projection and security issues, the latter is more associated with foreign economic policies and strategies of non-territorial power projection (even if enabled by the power of a territorial state; for instance in opening up foreign markets, etc.). We do, however, see geopolitical and geo-economic strategy as fundamentally interrelated and as forming an integral part of capitalist imperialism.¹ Yet, for the sake of simplicity in the following we use the term ‘geopolitical strategy’ as shorthand for both aspects.

This article proceeds as follows. The first section below starts with a brief review of the various attempts to theorize the ‘new imperialism’ with which the US foreign policy under Bush Jr. has become associated. We will conclude that although enlightening, these explanations are incomplete and above all ignore the role of agency. Seeking to go beyond the current literature we adopt a neo-Gramscian approach that emphasizes how geopolitical strategy is actually constructed by what we denote as a *hegemonic project* through a network of actors, whose practices, however, are in turn shaped by a) their own social positions and the related interests; b) the broader global structural context within which they operate. The latter, however, must be viewed as in part, the product of past geopolitical strategies. From this perspective we will argue that inasmuch Bush has represented change vis-à-vis Clinton, just as much as Obama may represent change vis-à-vis Bush, these changes must be interpreted in terms of different responses to the deepening contradictions of the process of neoliberal globalization, which the US has led since the end of the Cold War. The second section therefore outlines how the strategy of neoliberal globalization as pursued under Clinton ran into several contradictions, which subsequently the neoconservative project sought to formulate a response to.

Far from determining the outcome, however, the geopolitical and geo-economic changes that we identify in the second section have only made the neoconservative turn *possible*. How it in fact emerged as a hegemonic concept for the geopolitical strategy of the US can only be analysed with reference to the agency of social and political forces. Employing the methodology of Social Network Analysis we will therefore in the third section map what we identify as networks of neoconservative intellectuals and policy-advisers and analyse the strategies they pursued. This analysis will demonstrate that the neoconservatives were no free-floating intellectuals but were closely linked to the government and also tied to, and supported by, dominant sections of US transnational capital. In fact, seeking to advance those capitalist class interests, the neoconservative project, we argue, remained firmly committed to the accumulation strategy that had previously underpinned the neoliberal globalization project, compensating for the erosion of *consent* for neoliberal globalization by emphasising *coercion* in the geopolitical realm. As such, we interpret the ‘neoconservative

moment' as *a hegemonic project for the continuation of US imperialism in the context of its rising contradictions*.

While this strategy itself has done little in slowing down the structural decline of US power -- and arguably has done the opposite -- we suggest that the underlying problem has been the failure to articulate a new successful US-centred accumulation strategy with the project for a 'new American century'. As has become obvious within the context of the current global financial and economic crisis, this is now indeed the biggest problem faced by Obama. In the final section, then, we will assess the limits of the possible for US geopolitical strategy under Obama, by combining an account of the structural conditions his administration inherits with a social network analysis of the agents who actually have to implement 'change'. We conclude that far from marking a radical break with Bush, Obama will be struggling to find a more effective response to the continuing contradictions of and challenges to US power while continuing to be committed to the goal of US primacy.

Theorizing the 'New Imperialism'

It has been the Bush presidency, and the policies it adopted in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which sparked an enormous interest in the question of change within US geopolitical strategy, and produced a huge literature seeking to account for that change. Within mainstream International Relations, the rationalist mainstream regards the foreign policy of Bush Jr. as a temporary aberration from what we would normally expect from a supposedly rational actor. Thus, from a neoliberal perspective John Ikenberry already in 2004 predicted a speedy return to the multilateral path that characterized the post-war era of US 'benign' hegemony (Ikenberry, 2004). For neorealists too the problem has been that US foreign policy behaviour under Bush contradicted their theoretical predictions, according to which the rational strategy to 'preserve' the post-Cold War 'unipolar moment' would be to play the role of an offshore balancer (Layne, 2006). Thus, both defensive and offensive realists have been unified in their strong criticism of the Bush doctrine, and in particular have condemned the Iraq war as an 'unnecessary war' (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2003).

Treating the geopolitical strategy under Bush thus as an anomaly, however, not only misses the important degree of continuity with respect to preceding US strategy, but above all wrongly suggests that the observed variation defies rational explanation. In this respect, recent historical materialist work on what is seen as the 'new' US imperialism offers a more promising avenue towards an understanding of the shift(s) of US geopolitical strategy since the turn of the millennium.

Continuity and Change in US Imperialism: Historical Materialist Perspectives

Within the revived historical materialist literature on theorising (capitalist) imperialism, a key dividing line pertains to the question whether or not the 'imperial project' of the Bush years represented anything new, or whether it was in fact the same old imperialist policies that the US has pursued since at least 1945. Representing a sophisticated version of the continuity thesis Ellen Wood argues that the Bush doctrine maybe madness but that it is a 'madness firmly rooted not only in the past half-century of US history but in the systemic logic of capitalism' (Wood, 2003: XVI; for a similar view see Panitch and Gindin, 2005). Although correctly pointing to some enduring continuities in US imperialism, the problem with this account is that it cannot explain the changes within these continuities.

In his influential account, David Harvey (2003) stresses both continuity and change, locating the origins of what he calls the ‘new imperialism’ in the 1970s and views it as a response to the then unfolding crisis of overaccumulation. US imperialism of the 2000s here represents a shift within that ‘new imperialism’ because *neoliberal* imperialism ‘was weakening on the inside’ (Harvey, 2003: 190). Within the dialectical relationship between what Harvey (Ibid., 27-30) identifies as the ‘capitalist logic’ and the ‘territorial logic’ of power, there was thus a shift from ‘consent to coercion’ with the rise of *neoconservative* imperialism.²

Arrighi’s (2005) analysis of the unravelling of US hegemony represents the clearest example of the ‘change thesis’, a change from the liberal internationalism of the Clinton years, and more generally a break with the whole tradition of US hegemony in the post-war era. According to Arrighi neoconservatism is above all rooted in the structural changes in the global political economy and the US’s position within it. Here the neoconservative project becomes a response to the structural and inevitable decline of US hegemony, indeed a desperate attempt to cling on to it by playing the trump card of US military superiority, an attempt that is, however, doomed to fail (see also Mann, 2004). As with Harvey, we find Arrighi’s analysis compelling in many respects, and indeed we will draw upon some of their ideas below. What we see as missing in these accounts though is the attention to the role of agency. Agency matters because there were, given the changing structural context, several options for US foreign policy after the turn of the millennium. The course that was chosen after 9/11 was far from a pre-determined one and was certainly not the only realistic response to the terrorist attacks themselves. It is thus that structuralist explanations cannot fully explain how and why one particular option was chosen over another.

Within a historical materialist tradition Paul (2007) offers an empirical analysis of ‘neoconservative imperialism’ which does include the role of agency. He offers an innovative ‘Gramscian’ interpretation of the US geopolitical strategy under Bush, arguing that it has to be interpreted as a ‘neoconservative moment’ of ‘American ceasarism’ which proved to be far from durable and in fact ‘by Fall 2005 had decisively ended’ (Ibid.: 66). Although we also adopt a neo-Gramscian conceptual framework, we would, in contrast to Paul, not see the ‘neoconservative moment’ as merely a passing moment of ‘ceasarism’. Rather, we interpret it as indicating a longer lasting shift in geopolitical strategy, that moreover was supported not just by a ‘rather narrow “crony capital” class fraction’ (Ibid.: 65) -- as Paul claims without any empirical substantiation -- but, as our evidence will show, by a much broader array of social forces. It is this which warrants an alternative neo-Gramscian account.³

Hegemonic Projects and the Integration of Structure and Agency

The Gramscian term ‘hegemonic project’ as developed by Bob Jessop (1990) denotes the agential moment of structural change, in which agency transforms pre-existing structures, while at the same time being enabled and constrained by those structures. Following Gramsci, Jessop (1990: 208) refers to a successful hegemonic project as involving ‘the mobilization of support behind a concrete, national-popular program of action which asserts a general interest in the pursuit of objectives that explicitly or implicitly advance the long-term interests of the hegemonic class (fraction)’. It is thus that a successful hegemonic project in the longer run will have to be linked to a successful accumulation strategy, that is, a strategy for the realization of ‘a specific “growth model” complete with its various extra-economic preconditions’ (Ibid.: 198). The rise of a new hegemonic project, however, does not necessarily have to coincide with the rise of a new accumulation strategy (Ibid.: 346). As Jessop points out, it is important to see that while ‘they may overlap partially and / or

mutually condition each other', accumulation strategy and hegemonic project are not identical:

While accumulation strategies are directly concerned with economic expansion on a national or international scale, hegemonic projects can be concerned principally with various non-economic objectives (even if economically conditioned and economically relevant). The latter might include military success, social reform, political stability or moral regeneration (Ibid.: 208).

In the short run, then, given 'specific conjunctures', there may well be a 'dissociation or inconsistency between them' (Ibid.).

We argue that in understanding the variations in US imperialism we also need to examine those 'specific conjunctures' in which one hegemonic project may take the place of another without necessarily being linked to a concomitant change in accumulation strategy. However, we stress with Jessop that in order to be successful hegemonic projects need to advance the interests of a dominant class fraction, and thus to be articulated to a successful accumulation strategy – whether old or new. Success is not guaranteed, but seeking to advance these interests is what a hegemonic project *is about*.

This brings us to the important 'geopolitical' dimension of any hegemonic project as formulated within the national context of a leading capitalist state such as the US. As states are key in providing the preconditions for capitalist markets to develop and for capitalist accumulation to take place (Van Apeldoorn and Horn, 2007), any national or transnational capitalist class is dependent upon the application of state power both nationally and internationally (e.g., Wood, 2003). Hegemonic projects, as expressive of underlying class interests, will therefore have to articulate not just a vision with regard to how to establish control over subordinate social groups in a domestic context (i.e. a national-popular programme), but also with respect to world order and the position of the respective state or states within it. It is thus that, as Van der Pijl (2007) maintains, class forms the crucial nexus between global capitalism and geopolitics: rather than viewing them as autonomous, they must be seen as internally related. This is not to imply that geopolitical strategy is in any way determined by objective class interests. On the contrary, these interests must be articulated politically and ideologically, and their possible translation into state policy must be seen as a contingent outcome of social and political struggles. Our claim is, however, that the content of these political and discursive practices is shaped by the social position of the actors engaging in it and by underlying social relations.⁴ It is thus that we must analyse how actors formulating geopolitical strategies are, to use Gramsci's (1971) terminology, organically linked to certain social forces and to class interests. It are such 'organic intellectuals', located both within and beyond the state apparatus, that must be seen as constructing a hegemonic project – formulating and disseminating a particular strategy – as an articulation of long-term class interests. It is thus that we seek to show how geopolitical strategy is not so much, as Harvey would have it, formulated by a class of state managers with separate interest and motivations (2003: 27), but by intellectuals, policy advisors and (in the end by) state officials who are in fact closely linked to private capitalist interests.

Although the capitalist class of the most powerful state may be highly integrated into certain patterns of transnational class formation, it is plausible that it has, at the same time, a clear sense of a distinct national interest. Precisely because of the fact that it sits at the top of the international and global hierarchy, it is acutely aware of the interest it has in maintaining the current system and of what it has to lose if the system breaks down. We therefore hypothesize that hegemonic projects formulated within the context of such a dominant state

will tend to express a strong *geopolitical consciousness*, and include a rather elaborate strategy with respect to how to exercise control over other states and their societies.

It is from this perspective that we will below analyse the rise and fall of the neoconservative project in terms of a hegemonic project that has been formulated and propagated within the *national* political arena of the US and has subsequently been very successful in shaping US foreign policy after 9/11.⁵ We explain the rise of this project by situating its origins within the contradictions and limits of what we see as the hegemonic project of neoliberal globalization that unfolded in the 1990s, while arguing that the effect of these structural dynamics were crucially mediated by the concrete agency of a political vanguard tied to dominant social forces within the US. The neoconservative project, we argue, offered an answer to that crucial question facing the US ruling class: how to prolong US global hegemony at a moment when the ‘answer’ of the neoliberal project no longer seemed that compelling anymore.

Contradictions and Limits of Neoliberal Globalization and the Neoconservative Response

Neoliberalism is essentially a project of restoring capitalist class power by liberating capital from its postwar constraints through a programme of marketization and privatization. As an accumulation strategy neoliberalism has been bound up with the processes of globalization and above all financialization, that is, it has been linked to the interests and growth strategies of the most globalized transnational corporations, in particular those representing global financial capital (on the latter see Duménil and Lévy, 2001).

In the US the rise of the neoliberal project is very much associated with the Reagan presidency, but it was under Clinton that the project both consolidated and deepened, indeed arguably reached its peak. Moreover, whereas, the Reagan era was still dominated by the geopolitics of the Cold War, it was the subsequent ‘defeat of the evil empire’ that opened up the possibility to ‘globalize’ the US liberal model that hitherto had been restricted to ‘the West’. It was thus that under Clinton neoliberalism was translated into a (neo)liberal internationalist foreign policy oriented towards the promotion of globalization *as a programme of global marketization and commodification*, with as its main instruments ‘multilateralism’ and ‘global governance’ through such institutions as the IMF and the World Bank (Gowan, 1999; Harvey, 2003, 2005; Van der Pijl, 2006: ch. 8).

As a geopolitical strategy in the broader sense, neoliberal globalization was about what has been dubbed ‘democratic enlargement’ (Brinkley, 1997) – effectively a strategy aimed capitalist market expansion in the long tradition of ‘Open Door imperialism’ (Williams, 2009; Layne, 2006) – the flip-side of which was a targeting of ‘rogue states’ who were resisting this liberal end-of-history world order (Dumbrell, 2002). Although in the case of Serbia in particular this did lead to war – a critical geopolitical move on the part of the US (see, e.g., Cafruny, 2009) – covert actions and economic sanctions were still the preferred instrument of ‘regime change’ (Harvey 2003: 195). Geopolitical rivalries were generally more muted in the post-Cold War 1990s and the globalization offensive (van der Pijl, 2006: ch. 8) generally emphasized consent over coercion.

However, as the 20th century came to a close the contradictions and limits of the neoliberal globalization project became increasingly manifest. In particular we identify the following sets of contradictions. First, within different national state-society complexes, and arguably above all in the US (see Harvey, 2003: 15-7), neoliberalism – as it promotes the commodification of everything, bringing more and more areas of social life under the

discipline of markets and of capital – tends to engender an atomization and social disintegration to such an extent as to undermine the social order that sustains capital accumulation. Increasingly this has engendered awareness, also on the part of various elites, that these centrifugal forces somehow have to be contained.

Second, and related to this fundamental social contradiction, since the end of the 1990s the *political* limits of neoliberalism have increasingly manifested themselves. What increasingly amounted to a transnational revolt against the discipline imposed by neoliberal globalization – or what Harvey (2003: 162-80) calls resistance against ‘accumulation by dispossession’ – takes on many different shapes and identities: from Hugo Chavez’ Bolivarian revolution; to the alter-globalization movement, and arguably also to some forms of radical political Islam. The transnational hegemony of neoliberalism has been weakening as a result. Thus Van der Pijl (2006: 405) is probably right in arguing that ‘[t]he neoliberal programme of the West, run aground across the globe, but tenaciously pursued nevertheless, has conjured up its own nemesis, which instills fear into ruling classes’. We may add here that the US ruling class in particular has reason to be the most fearful, as it has the most to lose.

Third, neoliberal globalization produces new *geo-economic and geopolitical* tensions as the dynamics of global capital accumulation shift the centre of gravity of the global economy away from the Atlantic and towards the Pacific. This historic shift may be seen as the price of the success of the very project of neoliberal globalization and how it has spread capitalist growth beyond the capitalist heartland. As described by both Arrighi (2005) and by Harvey (2003) the global process of endless capital accumulation, with US capital in the lead since the early 20th century, involves a process of constant geographical expansion as (surplus) capital needs to find new profitable outlets, especially in order to overcome capitalism’s chronic tendency to produce crises of overaccumulation. However, as Harvey explains, his ‘spatial fix’ as a way to resolve capitalism’s inner contradictions, only reproduces these contradictions on a bigger geographical scale, as the export of capital creates ‘new spaces of capital accumulation [that] will ultimately generate surpluses and well seek ways to absorb them through geographical expansions’ (Harvey, 2003: 120). Whereas the capitalist growth generated by US capitalist expansion in regions as Western Europe and Japan has not led to a successful challenge of US hegemony, arguably the more recent rise of East Asia, and especially China (Arrighi, 2005: 74-80;) is of a different order, and has created rival centres of accumulation threatening the geopolitical and geo-economic preeminence of the US.

The above outlined *social, political and geopolitical* contradictions and tensions became apparent before the manifestation of arguably the most fundamental contradiction of neoliberalism, which is that its finance-led accumulation strategy has produced enormous riches for a global rentier class that has effectively restored capitalist class hegemony under its leadership (Duménil and Levy, 2001), but is ultimately unable to sustain capitalist accumulation in the longer run. But, although with the burst of the dot com bubble and the subsequent recession, the limits of financialization became visible already shortly after the turn of the millennium, it was still at that time most of all the *political project* of neoliberalism -- rather than its underlying accumulation strategy -- that had entered into a hegemonic crisis (cf. Paul, 2007). It is this hegemonic crisis, we argue, that enabled the rise of an alternative hegemonic project.

One of the most important aspects of this neoconservative project in our view is its ‘answer’ with respect to the first *social* contradiction of neoliberalism. Although neoconservatism has much in common with neoliberalism - in particular in its aim at preserving capitalist class power through strengthening the market as the arbiter of social life - it also goes beyond it in that it explicitly recognizes that the price mechanism alone cannot sufficiently provide order in society. It is the overriding concern with order, and the willingness to back up that order through coercion, both domestically and internationally, that

distinguishes the neoconservative project from the neoliberal project. As Harvey (2005: 82). writes:

Neoconservatism [...] has reshaped neoliberal practices in two fundamental respects: first, in its concern for order as an answer to the chaos of individual interests, and second, in its concern for an overweening morality as the necessary social glue to keep the body politic secure in the face of internal and external dangers.

The most crucial part of the neoconservative ‘answer’ to the *political* and *geopolitical* contradictions of the neoliberal project, we would argue, is about how to deal with the external dangers, imagined or real. We will here outline what can be regarded as the key elements of this neoconservative ‘answer’, i.e. geopolitical strategy (extensively described elsewhere, e.g., Kagan and Kristol, 2000 ; Dueck, 2004; Steltzer, 2004; Hurst, 2005)

First, an emphasis on US global primacy as the explicit objective of US foreign policy: a clear and unequivocal commitment to maintain US’ global leadership and neutralize any potential threat to its supremacy. Second, a strong emphasis on US military (more than economic) supremacy as the foundation of its global power. Third, a rejection of what was at least a partial postwar commitment to multilateralism and a turn towards an explicit unilateralism in defence of US primacy. Fourth, what later came to be known as the pre-emptive strike doctrine: the explicit claim of the US that it cannot be constrained by international law in preventing so-called threats to its national security. Fifth, the dedication to ‘export’ liberal democracy if necessary through ‘regime change’ by military means. Although none of these elements were entirely new either in the theory or in the practice of US foreign policy, it was the particular emphasis they gained in the geopolitical strategy shaped by the neoconservatives during the 1990s that marked the crucial shift from the neoliberal globalization offensive of Clinton. Thus, for instance, although the objective of US primacy has arguably been at the heart of US ‘grand strategy’ since 1940 (Layne, 2006), it have been the neoconservatives that have made this again into the overt number one priority in the post- Cold War context, and, above all, have shifted the focus to military force as the main means to achieve it. These elements subsequently were brought together under, and legitimated by, the concept of the *war on terror*, which enabled a redefinition of the security environment and the ‘enemy’; a reform of the US military and intelligence services, and set the context for new forms of international and military cooperation such as ad hoc ‘coalitions of the willing’ (see for this last point also Krahmann, 2005). Above all it was under the banner of the war on terror that a coercive geopolitical strategy aimed at, as we shall argue below, the global promotion of US-centred neoliberal accumulation could be presented as in the general interest of ‘ultimately fighting for our democratic values and way of life’ (White House, 2002:31).

As has been extensively documented elsewhere (e.g. Dorrien , 2004, ch. 4; Halper and Clarke, 2004), it was this comprehensive geopolitical strategy that came to be adopted by the Bush administration after 9/11, as most clearly expressed in the key policy document of the 2002 *National Security Strategy* (White House, 2002). The blueprint for this strategy was, however, already devised in the early 90s, but at the time was still far too controversial and therefore quickly shelved (Tyler, 1992). It was the ‘window of opportunity’ provided by 9/11 that allowed for the implementation of this strategy a decade later, as in that context it appeared to be a plausible strategy to deal with the US new ‘external dangers’. These structural and circumstantial conditions have not *determined* this outcome however; other kinds of answers were possible. We argue that the reason why it was this particular answer -- that had been more than ten years in the making -- that ultimately came to be translated into official policy, has crucially depended upon agency and the active promotion of ideas.

The Rise of the Neoconservative Project -- a Social Network Analysis

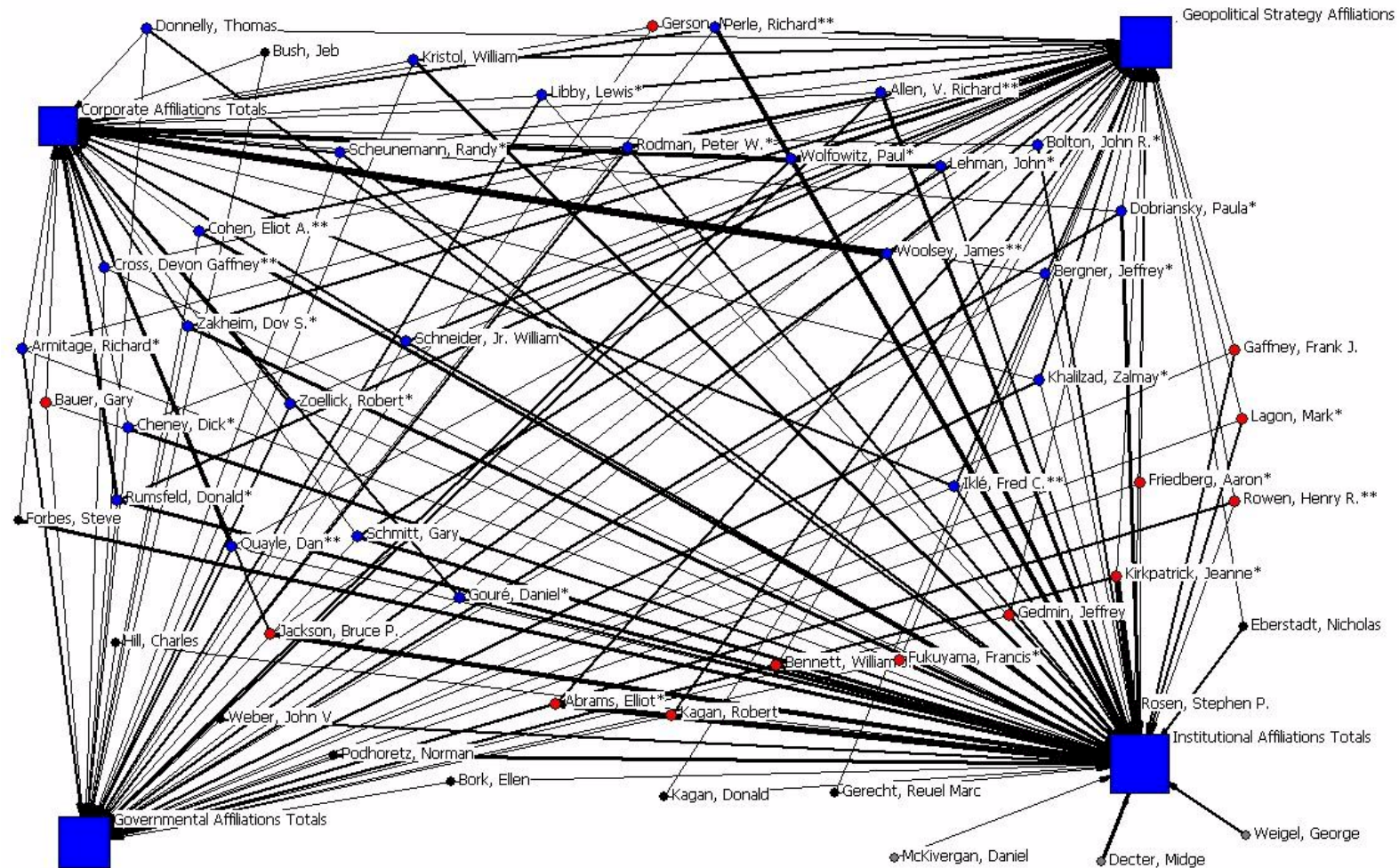
In this section we will analyse the agency that constructed and propagated the neoconservative project by employing Social Network Analysis (SNA), using the software programme UCINET (Borgatti, Everett and Freeman, 2002). SNA distinguishes itself from more traditional methods in that it focuses on relations between actors instead of comparing their attributes (Wasserman and Faust 1994). Hence it allows for an analysis of how individual agency is embedded in and at the same time constructs social structure. Such a methodological approach marries well with our theoretical approach: it will allow us to analyse how strategic actors shaping US geopolitical strategy occupy certain social *positions*, linked to an underlying class structure that forms an important context in which their practices are shaped.

Mapping the Neoconservative Network

In order to identify the neoconservative network, we took as our point of the departure the well known platform from which the neoconservative project was launched: *The Project for the New American Century* (PNAC). Although maybe not the most extensive or durable channel of neoconservative thought, the PNAC, founded in 1997 by William Kristol, did come to serve as a focal point of the neoconservative project, in which previously existing ideas, actors and influences converged. We took as our selection criterion the most active affiliates of PNAC⁶ in the period 1997-2001 (N=52) and from them the network was mapped out by listing the affiliations of each of these actors in the period from the end of the Cold War until 2006.

Confirming the centrality of the PNAC as a focal point of the neoconservative network, it turned out that PNAC affiliation generated a vast, dense, and highly cohesive network. Graph 1 below gives an overview of the PNAC network's affiliations to 1) the *private institutional level* (e.g. neoconservative think tanks, policy institutes, media), 2) *government* (the Republican administrations of Reagan 1981-1989, Bush 1989-1993, Bush Jr 2001-2006), 3) *ad-hoc geopolitical strategy projects*; and, 4) *corporate affiliations* (board membership, executive and advisory functions). The graph shows that there are no isolates (i.e. unconnected actors), and that only a very few actors have but one connection.⁷ In fact, a substantial part of the network, 27 out of our 52 actors, *is connected on all four dimensions*. These findings thus confirm the notion that there has been a cohesive neoconservative network with a vast institutional structure at its disposal, providing it with a dense and highly connected pattern of channels through which ideas could be diffused and shared.⁸

Graph 1 Overview PNAC Network



Sources: Who's Who 2006, International Relations Center 2006, *Right Web*, <http://rightweb.irc-online.org/about.php> (10.09.06), biographies, membership rosters, participant lists, annual reports of the affiliated companies, institutions and organisations.

To assess the overlap between the identified neoconservative network and the state level, the actors' affiliations with US (Republican) administrations, since the Reagan administration, were mapped. Table 1 below provides an overview of the total of interlocks. The total number of interlocks with Republican administrations ranges from a total of 34 in the Reagan administration, 23 in the Bush Sr. administration, and 29 in the Bush Jr. administration. Although these numbers suggest that the presence of the neoconservatives was strongest in the Reagan administration, it must be taken into account that in the last Republican administration these actors generally held more powerful positions than in the two preceding ones -- showing their prolonged rise to power. More importantly, whereas the presence of neoconservatives in Republican administrations has been relatively constant, it has been the interplay with crucial structural changes that produced the particular shift in US geopolitical strategy that we are analysing.

Table 1 State Affiliations

		1	2	3
		Bush Jr	Bush Sr.	Reagan
1	Bush Jr. (2001-2008)	29	17	21
2	Bush Sr. (1989-1993)	17	23	19
3	Reagan (1981-1989)	21	19	34

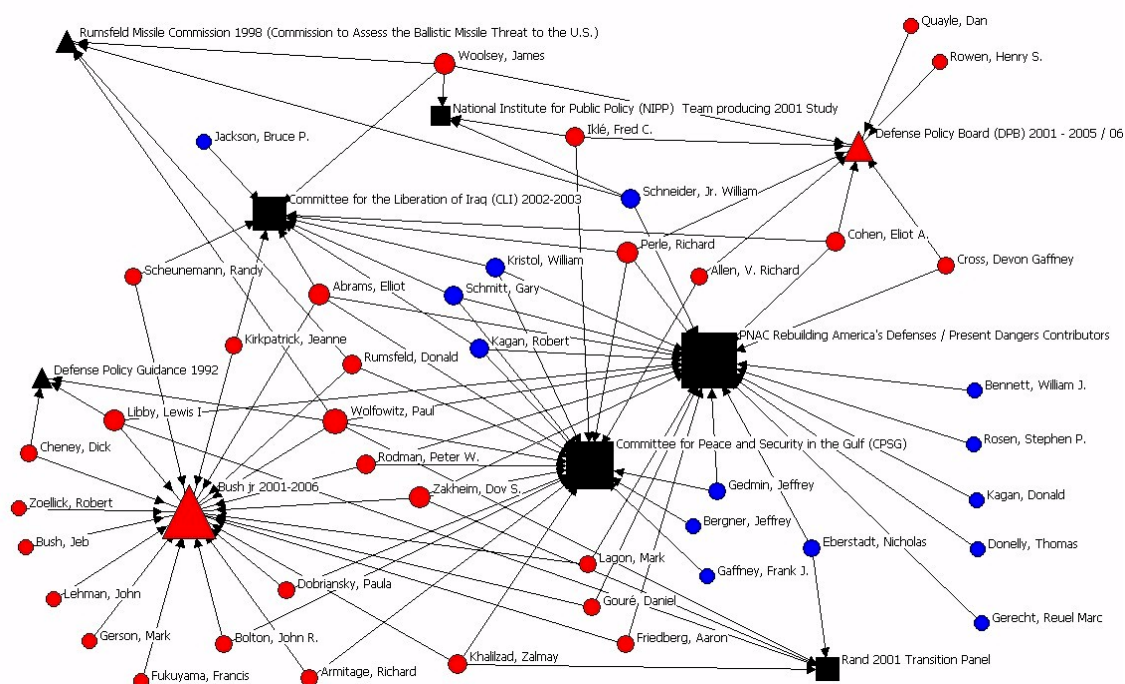
Sources: Who's Who 2006, International Relations Center 2006, biographies, membership rosters, participant overviews, annual reports of the affiliations.

Although the reach of the neoconservative network into the Bush government was thus extensive, we need to establish how the ideas that were formed and disseminated at the private institutional level *did actually reach into government* and were turned into official US foreign policy. Therefore we need to go back to the 1990s when various ad-hoc 'projects' were initiated in which this geopolitical strategy was formulated and presented as *the* answer to perceived 'present dangers' (Kagan and Kristoll, 2000). These ad-hoc projects generated reports and advocacy statements, with the explicit aim to influence US foreign policy. In order to show a direct relation between these formulations of geopolitical strategy and official US post-9/11 geopolitical strategy, we should find not only an overlap in content, but also a *plausible connection* to the level of official foreign policymaking. We thus identified those actors from the neoconservative network that participated in a selection of the most significant of these ad-hoc study projects and analysed their interlocks with the Bush Jr. administration. The most important 'projects' are the 1992 *Defense Policy Guidance (DPG)* which provided a quite literal blueprint for what later became the 'war on terror'; the PNAC (2000) report: *Rebuilding America's Defences*, which states in its introduction to build further upon the shelved DPG 1992 and is intended as 'a roadmap for the nation's immediate and future defense plans'; the *Center for Peace and Security in the Gulf*, which in 1998 advocated the overthrow of Saddam Hussein; and the PNAC volume *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Defense and Foreign Policy* (Kagan and Kristoll, 2000) a key representative volume of neoconservative foreign policy thought. Other included projects are: the *Rumsfeld 1998 Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the U.S.*; the *National Institute for Public Policy (NIPP)* team's 'Study on Rationale and Requirements for Nuclear Forces and Arms Control' (from 2001); and the *RAND Transition 2001 Panel*.

Graph 2, below, contains what is labelled a ‘Geopolitical Strategy Route’: a mapping of the involved actors in the above outlined ‘projects’ and their interlocks with the Bush Jr. administration and other key institutional nodes: the Defense Policy Board -- which played a critical role in the formulation of post-9/11 foreign policy (see e.g. Halper and Clarke, 2004; Dorrien, 2004) -- and the influential Committee for the Liberation of Iraq.

This rather complicated web of interlocking relations clearly reveals not only the degree of *direct interaction* that has been taking place between a substantive number of actors within small subsets of the network, but also how through these interactions at the private institutional level, ideas and concrete policy proposals were directly inserted into actual foreign policy-making. Thus, for instance, we can read from this graph that: of all those involved in at least one of these study projects, 22 held a position in the Bush administration, many of them on crucial Defence, National Security and Intelligence positions. And of the

Graph 2 Geopolitical Strategy Route – Neoconservative Network



Key: actor = circle, public sector = triangle, private sector = square,
node size = degree (i.e. ratio total number of affiliations of actor or a sector to total number of affiliations).

Sources: as above.

principal actors involved in the 1992 Defense Policy Guidance Draft, all three (Cheney, Wolfowitz and Libby) have had high level positions in the Bush administrations. What the above analysis thus shows is how this influence has been facilitated through long-term and recurrent active promotion of certain ideas through an extensive network of institutional and governmental channels, spanning across the US state- civil society complex.

A Neoconservative Hegemonic Project?

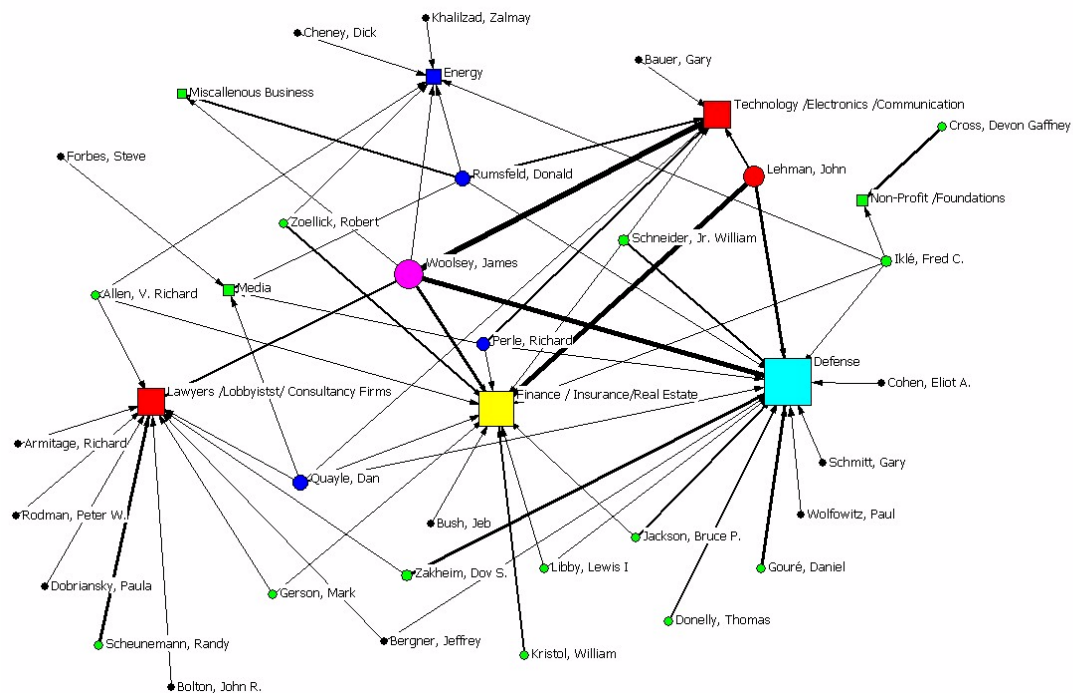
Although the neoconservatives through the above mapped network have thus been successful in propagating and turning into official policy their particular strategy to prolong US global primacy, the question remains to what extent the neoconservative project actually constituted a hegemonic project. To what extent was it a national-popular programme that rested upon the consent of broad sections of society? And to what extent was the neoconservative project actually linked to and seeking to advance the long-term interests of dominant class fractions?

With regard to the first question it must be remembered that the neoconservative project constituted a much more comprehensive political programme than just a geopolitical strategy, addressing not only the question of how to preserve and even expand US power abroad, but also how to restore social order at home. Although it falls largely outside the scope of this article, this domestic dimension has of course been important in creating consent and a social base for the Bush administrations national popular programme. A programme that in many respects continued the neoliberalism of his predecessors, in fact, even deepening this in terms of redistribution of wealth towards the top but added to it the dimensions of social conservatism ('morality') and increasing state surveillance (especially after 9/11) (see Stelzer, 2004). An important element here was the growing Christian fundamentalism within a large section of US society; a source of popular support upon which the neoconservatives skilfully drew (Harvey, 2003: 190-9). The most important indicator of popular support for this programme has of course been the re-election of Bush in 2004. As is well known, this popular support applied not only to domestic but also to the new foreign policy, with the 'war on terror' indeed having developed into a hegemonic discourse shared by both Republicans and Democrats

Given our premise that a hegemonic project is about the pursuit of objectives that serve the long-term interests of a hegemonic class (fraction) (Jessop, 1990:208), we now turn to second question: to what extent can we link this programme to dominant capitalist class interests? We will do this by analysing the neoconservative network's corporate affiliations and the support for the neoconservative strategy in terms of campaign finance and policy advocacy.

A mapping of the corporate affiliations of the members of the neoconservative network revealed that 60 per cent has had direct corporate affiliations.⁹ The total of interlocks amounts to 94 and included almost 80 different corporations. Graph 3 below clusters the affiliated corporations by sector.¹⁰ The size of the nodes expresses the actor's 'degree', i.e. their number of ties with the corporate world compared to the total of corporate interlocks, the thickness of the tie expresses the strength of each actor's connection to a particular sector, which can be several. The exact overall distribution of corporate interlocks is: defence 28; finance 20; technology 14; law firms 14; energy 7; media 4; miscellaneous 3; and non-profit 4.

Graph 3 Corporate Affiliations - Neoconservative Network



Key: sectors=squares, actors =circles, size of nodes = node degree (i.e. ratio total number of affiliations of actor / sector to total number of affiliations), tie strength = number of affiliations of actor to sector.

Sources: see text.

The extensive link with the defence industry does appear to confirm the often suggested tight link between the neoconservatives and the defence sector (Hosseini-zadeh, 2006; Paul, 2007). Our findings, however, make clear that there is also a large overlap with financial capital groups, technology firms and law firms. A substantial part of the affiliated corporations (almost 20 per cent) moreover had a Fortune 500 notation,¹¹ which indicates both the size and the multinational scope of a substantial part of the affiliated corporations. On the basis of these data we therefore do not find it plausible to conclude that narrow interests in the defence industry *solely* or even primarily shaped the strategy of the Bush administration. Of course, the defence industry has specific interests and will also try to advance those. The Center for Public Integrity has for instance estimated the total amount of post-war contracts to US corporations (about 150) in Iraq and Afghanistan to be around \$ 48.7 billion.¹² And of those corporations several are directly affiliated to the neoconservative network we have identified (e.g. Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Science Applications International Corp., Dyncorp International, Halliburton, and Kellogg, Brown and Root). But contrary to what is often claimed, we did not find empirical evidence of the manifestation of a clash of interests between these more narrow capital groups and other sectors, such as financial capital. This indicates that the strategy as formulated and implemented by the Bush administration rested upon the support of a much wider set of capitalist class interests than has been suggested in some of the literature.

This broad support amongst the dominant fractions of US capital also transpires from an analysis of the campaign support in 2004. The Bush administration received its largest contributions from the sector of high finance, a capital fraction that might be considered representing transnationally mobile and global capital *par excellence*. Wall Street icons such as Morgan Stanley, Merrill Lynch, Goldman Sachs, PricewaterhouseCoopers were major contributors to Bush's 2004 campaign and the financial sector at large supported him with double the amount that was offered to his strongest democratic contender (Center for Responsive Politics, 2006). If we interpret this financial support in 2004 as a verdict on Bush's post-9/11 (geo-)political programme, it indicates that the support from the corporate and financial world -- including the most powerful of Wall Street's firms - has been quite high.

Not only have leading capitalist interests supported Bush's (re-)election, they have also at times expressed key vocal support for Bush's post 9/11 policies. The US Chamber of Commerce, the world largest business federation and one of the nation's most prominent business lobbies, for instance, stated in its 2002 annual report that it 'fully support[s] President Bush's war against terrorism on all fronts', adding in what can be seen as an unequivocal endorsement of what later came to be known as the Bush doctrine that 'the centrepiece of homeland defense must be to bring the war to the enemy' (US Chamber of Commerce, 2002: 24). This support for what they anticipated to be a 'lengthy war' included the willingness to 'pay for a costly but essential defense of our homeland and our way of life' (Ibid.: 9); US business will thus also '[c]ontinue to support necessary increases in defense appropriations' (US Chamber of Commerce, 2003: 16).

We thus conclude that the neoconservative project has from the start been linked to and supported by leading fractions of US capital, including the defence industry but also Wall Street and other sections of transnational capital. More importantly, the support extended to the geopolitical strategy, which was perceived to be also a defence of *US capital's* global interests. Moreover, this geopolitical strategy, far from seen as potentially undermining the conditions for accumulation, was perceived to be congruent with the still hegemonic neoliberal accumulation strategy. Thus the Chamber saw 'the successful prosecution of the war on terrorism' as a key to economic recovery (2002: 13-4).

For the Bush administration these elements were also seen as integral parts of the same strategy, and as such it remained committed to a *neoliberal accumulation strategy* based upon the logic of global free markets and free trade. In fact, an essential element of the post 9/11 geopolitical strategy, as outlined in the *National Security Strategy* of 2002 (White House, 2002), was to facilitate and legitimize the *global expansion of capital* to previously closed areas (as was the intention with Iraq and Afghanistan), formulating as one of its main objectives to 'ignite a new era of global economic growth through free markets and free trade' (Ibid.: 17).¹³ Although indeed certain narrow defence industry interests benefitted directly from the strategy in terms of a radically increased defence budget and reconstruction contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the support for the neoconservative strategy of the other capital groups identified above, we would argue, stems from the fact that it was aimed at advancing the interests of US capital at large along the lines of the hegemonic neoliberal accumulation strategy, i.e., it was perceived as the best strategy to defend the interests of the US ruling class. Another matter is whether these interests were also served in the longer run, or whether inherent limitations of this strategy, have not meant that ultimately the conditions for accumulation have been weakened rather than strengthened.

The Limits of the Neoconservative Project

In the *longer run*, we would suggest, the neoconservative project has not been successful as a hegemonic project. Although this was most obvious with respect to the fallout of the Iraq quagmire, the particular geopolitical strategy that was implemented after 9/11 also created a more general backlash inasmuch as the emphasis on coercion led to a loss of consent internationally. Although the ‘war on terror’ was supported by a broad international coalition, the aggressive unilateralism displayed by the Bush administration and its explicit disregard of international law and human rights has generated global discontent, provoked more assertive policies from major and minor contenders, and generally further eroded the already waning legitimacy of US hegemony. Moreover, the geopolitical strategy was an extremely costly one which, while initially boosting particular sectors in the US economy, in the longer term only weakened the already fragile economic position of the US (e.g. Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008).

Secondly, and even more importantly, the neoconservative project entirely ignored the formulation of a *new accumulation strategy* in meeting the challenges of the faltering neoliberal project. As argued above, a hegemonic project, in order to be successful in the long run, does need to be articulated with a successful accumulation strategy. However, the neoconservative project, while providing a set of answers to the new geopolitical situation, failed to address the limits of the neoliberal accumulation strategy that have become increasingly apparent. Indeed, the global financial and economic crisis that erupted towards the end of the Bush presidency has demonstrated the bankruptcy of this strategy, also from the perspective of the general capitalist interest. The crisis has also further weakened US power and discredited its global policies, leading to a collapse of the Washington Consensus. It is this that forms the structural global context in which Obama and his administration will have to act to formulate a new and more effective strategy or hegemonic project.

Continuity and Change after the Neoconservative Project

It has been in the context of the failing neoconservative project that the need for change was widely and deeply felt within the US and across the globe, a sentiment that was aptly captured by the slogan with which Obama won the presidency. In this final section we will assess to what extent change is actually possible and how it relates to continuities in US imperialism. We will therefore turn to the agency involved in the networks of influence and power behind the Obama administration. Although it is too early to identify whether the Obama administration really pursues its own distinct geopolitical strategy, let alone whether we can speak of the rise of a new hegemonic project, our purpose is rather to assess -- again with the help of social network analysis -- both the agential and structural elements that may or may not combine into an effective response to the ongoing hegemonic crisis in which the US finds itself.

Networks of Change?

In order to get a better grasp of the agency behind Obama we took the inner circle of his administration, including the White House Staff and the Cabinet members (appointed at time of writing) and some highly influential economic and foreign policy advisors behind the scenes (N=46). Data were collected from governmental websites, and cross checked with biographies published on institutional and corporate websites, Business Week and Forbes

people tracker. Similar to the procedure with regard to the neoconservative network, these actors' affiliations were mapped at different levels: the state-level, the private institutional level, and the corporate level. In order to place the Obama-network in a broader historical perspective the interlocks with previous administrations back to 1981 were mapped. The result is depicted in Table 2 below.¹⁴

Table 2 State Affiliations Obama Team

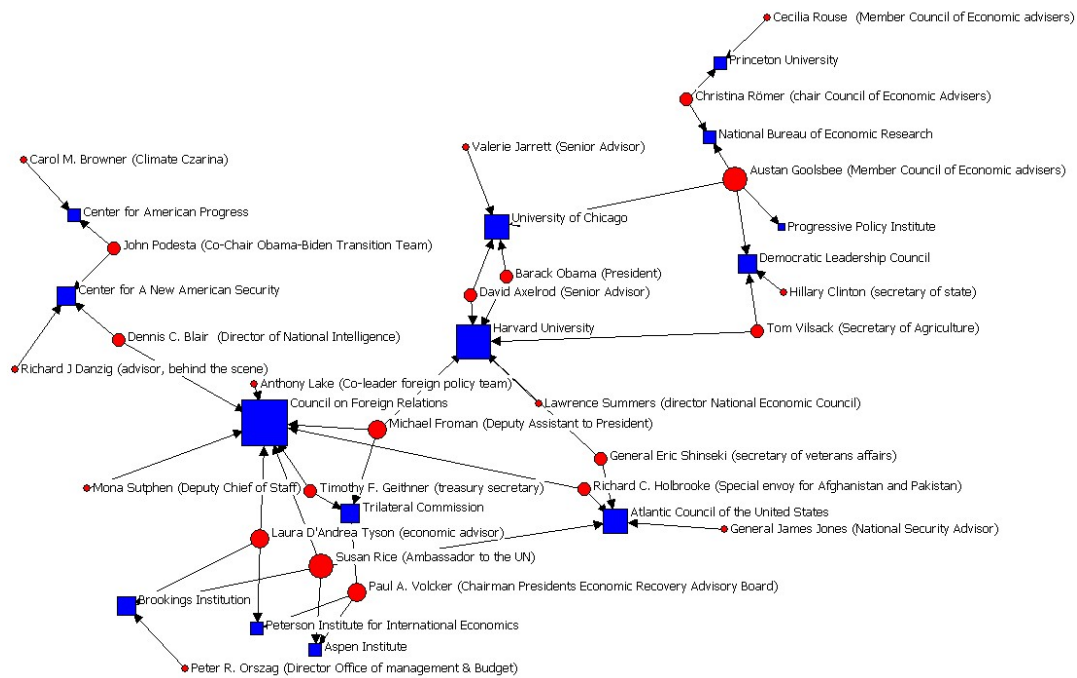
	Obama's 2008 Campaign	Transition Team – (Economic) Advisory Board	Reagan 1981- 1989	Bush sr. 1989- 1993	Clinton 1993- 2001	W. Bush 2001- 2008	Other State Affiliation
Obama's 2008 Campaign	17	7	1	0	7	0	13
Transition Team – (Economic) Advisory Board	7	16	1	1	6	0	10
Reagan 1981-1989	1	1	2	1	0	1	0
Bush sr. 1989-1993	0	1	1	3	2	3	2
Clinton 1993-2001	7	6	0	2	20	3	13
W. Bush 2001-2008	0	1	1	3	3	5	3
Other State Affiliation	13	10	0	2	13	2	34

Source: US Government, White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/>

From the diagonal we can read the total of affiliations with each administration. The overlap between the key actors in the Obama administration with the Clinton administration (20 out of 46) clearly stands out. Remarkably, there is however also an overlap between the Obama and the Bush administrations of about 11 per cent. The category 'Other State Affiliation' refers to either positions before 1981, or to functions that are at state level, but not the White House Staff or the Cabinet. The fact that this category has such a high level of interlocks may be taken as a sign of continuity inasmuch as many of the Obama inner circle have a long history of US policy-making and hence are deeply socialized with the 'rules of the game'.

Turning to the level of ideas, Graph 4 below depicts think tank affiliation and academic affiliation of the Obama network. The reach of this network is in fact much wider, but we only included affiliations with at least two interlocks. The actor degree is expressed in size, which means a bigger node implies more affiliations. The graph shows some distinct clusters within the network.

Graph 4 Think tank and Academic Affiliation Obama Team

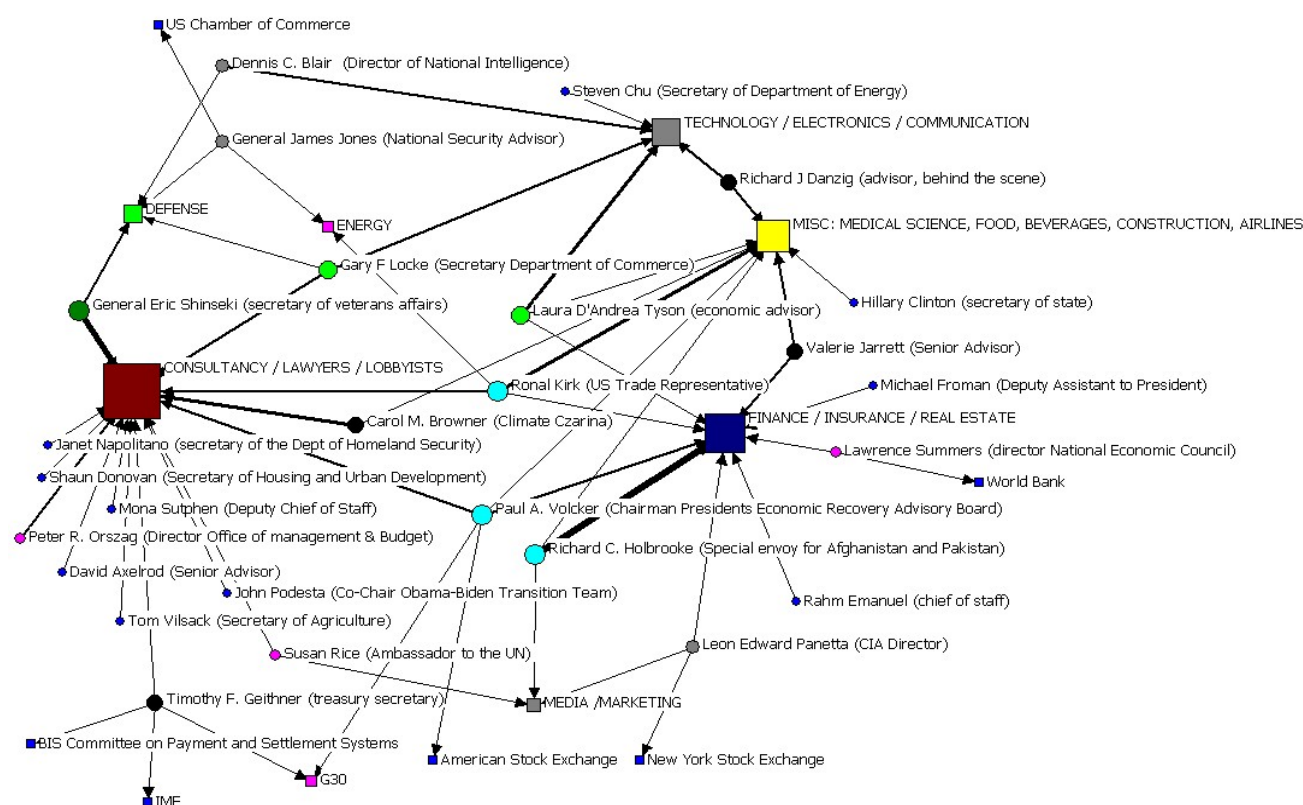


Sources: US Government, White House, institutional websites, corporate websites, Business Week, Forbes.

The bottom-left corner shows a cluster with a transnational, neoliberal focus, including affiliations with the Trilateral Commission, the Aspen Institute and the Peterson Institute for International Economics. Susan Rice, Paul Volcker, Laura D'Andrea, Timothy Geithner and Michael Froman are key nodes in this cluster. A similar transnational orientation speaks from the affiliations with the Atlantic Council of the US, a think tank that however focuses more on US leadership and foreign policy. In the left upper corner we find a cluster that is much more oriented toward security issues and the idea of 'American primacy', showing a high interlock with the Center for a New American Security, a centrist think tank established in 2007 with close ties to defence industry (Lockheed Martin and Raytheon). John Podesta and Denis C. Blair are key figures here. Another national security cluster can be found at the opposite side of the graph, just below the upper right hand corner, with Hillary Clinton, Tom Vilsack and Austan Goolsbee as key players connected to the Democratic Leadership Council and the Progressive Policy Institute. These think tanks, which in reality are closely linked, are known for their hawkish view on national security issues (e.g. Heilbrun, 2006), not deviating much from the neoconservative views on those matters. The strongest academic link was found with Harvard University (Obama's alma mater) and the University of Chicago.¹⁵

In short, the Obama team at the level of ideas appears to consist of several clusters focussing on either national security issues, of which some can be characterized as considerably hawkish, or on economic issues, where the affiliated institutions bear a clearly neoliberal mark and history. But to what extent and how is the Obama network linked to dominant capital fractions in the US? Graph 5 below shows the corporate affiliations of the Obama network.

Graph 5 Corporate Affiliations Obama Team



Key: sectors=squares, actors =circles, size of nodes = node degree (i.e. ratio total number of affiliations of actor / sector to total number of affiliations), tie strength = number of affiliations of actor to sector.

Sources: US Government, White House, institutional websites, corporate websites, Business Week, Forbes.

It turns out that 26 out of the 46 actors within the Obama network had corporate ties.¹⁶ Although space constraints do now allow us to present the full list of companies involved, these include (former) Wall Street giants such as: Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley, Lehman Brothers, Citigroup, AIG; multinationals such as: WalMart, Nestlé, Microsoft, AT & T, Kodak; energy and defence majors such as Chevron, Boeing, Honeywell International, and international law firms such as Mc Kinsey; Albright Group, and Kissinger Associates. In the graph these affiliations are aggregated per sector. The size of the node expresses the degree, that is: the total number of corporate affiliations of the Obama-network within this particular sector. The exact numbers are: Consultancy / Lawyers: 23; Finance: 15, Miscellaneous: 12, Technology: 10, Defence: 5, Media: 3, Energy: 2. There are also interlocks with the following global regulatory bodies: the IMF (1), the BIS (1), the World bank (1), the Group of 30 (2) and NYSE (1). The biggest overlap is clearly with the law firms, followed by the financial sector, and technology -- sectors that are arguably highly transnational and neoliberal in outlook. As we have seen (see Graph 3, p. xx), these sectors were also heavily interlinked with the Bush administration.

In comparison to the neoconservative network the overall overlap with the corporate world is nearly as extensive: 60 per cent in the case of the neoconservatives compared to more than 55 per cent in the case of the Obama network. One notable difference in the overall

distribution of the interlocks is the relations to the defence sector. Whereas there are ties between the Obama administration and the defence industry (recent directorships in boards of e.g. Ducommun, EDO Defense Systems, Honeywell and Boeing Co.), the total number of interlocks is modest in contrast to the neoconservative network where the defence industry was in fact was the most extensively affiliated sector.¹⁷

In sum, the network analysis of the Obama presidency shows elements of both continuity and change with respect to previous administrations. The continuity is the most obvious with respect to the Clinton administration. Yet equally striking is the continuity in terms of the extent and sectoral composition of corporate affiliations with respect to the neoconservative network of the Bush administration -- notwithstanding the relative shift away from the defence industry. The continuing dominance of financial sector ties -- which is probably an aspect of continuity stretching back to at least Clinton -- can be seen as an indication of the hegemonic position of this capital fraction (until recently at least) and of a concomitant neoliberal accumulation strategy.¹⁸

The next question is how this configuration of actors, ideas and interests shapes the geopolitical strategy of the new administration and to what extent and how it could offer an 'answer' to the inherited structural conditions. An important point to emphasize is that, following our theoretical approach, the strategy cannot be simply read of the network of actors, their positions, ideas and interests; because their agency is also critically shaped by the broader global context in which they find themselves -- a context which at the same time is also a product of past strategies, including that of the neoconservative project. It is for this reason for instance that despite the high number of former Clinton officials within the Obama team, we cannot expect a simple return to Clintonesque neoliberal imperialism. Whereas we cannot yet identify, let alone assess, an 'Obama doctrine', we highlight some aspects of his emergent geopolitical strategic orientation below.

Strategies of Change?

With regard to Obama's foreign and security policies, one main difference with Bush so far appears to be the shift from Iraq to Afghanistan (and Pakistan), the real 'central front in the war on terror' (Obama, 2008: 114), with the recently announced 'surge' of another 30,000 troops (the second increase under Obama) to 'disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda' (White House, 2009) trebling the number of troops present under Bush. This geographical shift in the former 'long war' does not represent much substantive change though, as this shift would also have taken place under Bush, and in fact was already announced by his -- now Obama's -- defence secretary (Robert Gates) towards the end of his administration .

Beyond concrete policies, and in terms of a more overarching geopolitical strategy, the new administration reveals a substantial continuity in terms of the geopolitical strategy as devised by the neoconservatives, even if the emphasis and tone has changed significantly. Obama remains committed to some kind of 'project for a new American century', continuing to 'believe', that the US is there to lead the world in the name of liberty and, importantly, that this leadership role implies increasing US's coercive capacity to be projected around the globe, in spite of a recognition that the rise of new powers may constrain this ability and might make a US-dominated system of global governance more difficult to sustain (see e.g. Obama, 2009a). This continuity was already apparent during the campaign (for a comprehensive overview of actual policy plans and proposals see Obama, 2008: 109-48). Below the rhetoric of change, this campaign revealed a commitment to a militaristic 'liberal interventionist' foreign policy that, in spite of a difference in emphasis with regard to some

elements, represented far from a radical break with Bush's 'neoconservative' policies. Indeed, a key element of Obama's 'plan' to 'rebuild America's leadership' has from the outset been, as with his predecessor, to maintain US *military* superiority in all areas to take on new 'twenty-first-century security challenges' such as terrorism, 'rogue nations', 'and rising powers that could become adversaries' (Obama, 2008: 122-3). Restoring US leadership here then not only means launching a public diplomacy offensive to 'show the Muslim world the best America has to offer' (Ibid. 118-19, witness the Cairo speech), but also, for instance, preserving '[the US's] unparalleled airpower capabilities to deter and defeat any conventional competitors' (Ibid.: 125). Both the continuing aspiration at American global leadership as well as the militaristic orientation of the strategy towards that aim clearly transpire from the following key foreign policy speech that Obama held in 2007:

I reject the notion that the American moment has passed. I dismiss the cynics who say that this new century cannot be another when, in the words of President Franklin Roosevelt, we lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good. (...) We must maintain the strongest, best-equipped military in the world in order to defeat and deter conventional threats. But while sustaining our technological edge will always be central to our national security, the ability to put boots on the ground will be critical in eliminating the shadowy terrorist networks we now face. (...) A 21st century military to stay on the offense, from Djibouti to Kandahar (Obama, 2007).

It is true that Obama of course also at the same time, and in contrast to his predecessor, emphasizes the role of importance of international institutions and regimes (lauding in particular the UN) and since taking office has stepped up, next to the deliberate public relations efforts to restore America's image abroad, the kind of diplomatic engagement -- including with so-called rogue states -- that was already going on in a more muted way at the end of the Bush reign. Although this engagement in the meantime has turned out to be less effective than hoped for and is being criticised from both the left and the right, and for instance vis-à-vis Iran a more hard-line stance seems now again in the offing, not just in style and tone but also in terms of actual foreign policy-making during Obama's first year 'the multilateral gloves' (Stokes, 2005) have to some extent been put back on. This seems to fit well with a 'liberal internationalist' outlook such as was also expressed by previous democratic administrations (e.g. Chanley, 1999). Yet this should not be taken as simply a return to previous policies.

First, the renewed emphasis on institutions and diplomacy is combined with a continued emphasis on the need to enhance and apply military power, and more so than during the last Democratic presidency. A clear testimony of this is Obama's Noble Peace Prize acceptance speech in which he stated that 'it was not just simply international institutions (...) that brought stability to a post-World War II world. (...) The United States of America has helped to underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strengths of our arms' (Obama, 2009b). In the same speech, praised by the leading neoconservative Robert Kagan (2009) as signalling a 'significant shift' towards 'a tougher, less forgiving, more quintessentially American approach', Obama moreover reiterated that 'I - like any head of state -- reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend my nation' (Obama, 2009b).

Second, inasmuch as Obama does represent a relative shift back from coercion to consent, this should be seen in light of the failures of the coercive strategies of neoconservative imperialism. As the latter has undermined consent for US power so much as to become rather counter-productive, playing the 'goodwill' card may not only come naturally

to Obama, but could also be seen as a strategy to seek to restore what is left of US global hegemony. The renewed search for consent that we have observed in Obama's first year, however, is one that is borne out of the fact that the US has only few cards left. This is crucially different from the neoliberal project of the Clinton years, which were the heyday for the power of both the US and the neoliberal ideology. In short, inasmuch as multilateralism is making somewhat of a comeback, it is out of weakness rather than strength.

Finally, as indicated, the biggest challenge for Obama arguably lies on the economic front, where Obama not only has to adapt to the new multipolar reality and the loss of US structural power, but also will have to cope with the economic and ideological failure of the neoliberal accumulation strategy as has been pursued over the past decades; a failure which can be seen as at the heart of the current economic crisis. Returning to our network analysis above, the fact that largely the same people, linked to the same capital interests, which promoted the neoliberal accumulation strategy in the 1990s in the first place (e.g. Larry Summers, Paul Volcker) are now in charge of solving the crisis, in this respect may not bode well. Although Obama has recognized, and indeed made into a key priority of his overall foreign policy, the need to tackle the financial crisis also at a global level, in particular through the G-20 as the new primary platform for global economic governance, the three summits held thus far have produced little in the way of concrete steps towards a global re-regulation of finance that could really form the basis for an alternative global growth model.

Conclusion

Whereas the US has been embarked on an imperialist project since at least the beginning of the 20th century, the particular kind of strategy that has been pursued to obtain this goal has varied according to the dialectical interaction between structural conditions and the role of agency and ideas, both globally, transnationally and domestically. This study has analysed both the neoconservative geopolitical strategy and the emerging geopolitical strategy of the Obama administration from a perspective that focuses on this dialectical interplay by interpreting these strategies as (potential) hegemonic projects and placing them in the context of the deepening contradictions of neoliberalism and a changing global economic and political order.

While the geopolitical strategy of the US during the Cold War was aimed at consolidating and preserving US hegemony within the capitalist world economy in the face of the challenge posed by the Soviet Union, and thus at 'protecting the West' – and its propertied classes – while at the same time maintain US primacy within it, the end of this conflict offered a chance for the US to extend its power and hegemony across the whole globe; to seize and consolidate 'the unipolar moment' and reshape the world order accordingly. In our view the main variations of US imperialism we have observed in the post-Cold War period are basically variations on this theme, that is, they are different strategies to achieve this same objective. The first such attempt crystallized under Clinton in a neoliberal project, the second such attempt was articulated under Bush as the neoconservative project *cum* geopolitical strategy. Although with Obama it has dawned upon the US that the unipolar moment may indeed have already passed or at least be nearing its end, we would contend that the fundamental objective of his administration's geopolitical strategy remains to preserve and where possible to expand US global power. Although more research needs to be undertaken here as the Obama strategy evolves, our preliminary analysis suggests that here too US state power must be seen in relation to class power. Rather than serving an autonomous *raison d'état* US state power serves the social purpose of supporting and sustaining the global expansion of US capital (Wood, 2003; Williams, 2009; cf. Layne, 2006). *How* and by *which*

strategy this social purpose will be served by the Obama administration, and how successful this strategy will be, should become clearer in the course of the next years. As argued, here we should relate the structural context of the global and US political economy to the position and outlook of the network of actors formulating and implementing US geopolitical strategy.

In spite of the strong continuity in terms of actors of the Obama administration with the Clinton administration, we conclude that this should not lead us to expect a simple return to the neoliberal strategies of the 90s. On the one hand, the election of Obama confirmed what was already apparent towards the end of the Bush reign: namely that the neoconservative project -- in which the US seeks to secure its long-term imperialist objectives primarily by playing the military trump card and seeking to impose US-style liberal democracy and markets through preventive war -- as such is over and as a hegemonic project only had short-lived success. Deepening the contradictions it set out to resolve, the neoconservative project actually undermined the prospects of success with respect to its most important objective: to prolong US hegemony into the next century.

On the other hand, a return to Clintonesque neoliberalism will not be possible, neither in economic policy nor in foreign policy, as indeed the policy record of Obama thus far confirms. Although his presidency ended with the aerial campaign against Serbia, the preferred instrument of US imperialism under Clinton was 'the Wall Street-Treasury-IMF complex' (Harvey, 2003: 185) seeking to globalise the 'empire of capital' (Wood, 2003) through largely non-military means (even if crucially backed up by US military might). Such a programme is no longer feasible for Obama. First of all, unlike Clinton, Obama's presidency is very much a war presidency and likely to remain so into a second term should he win the next elections. Although Obama has promised to end the war in Iraq at the time of writing the 'responsible withdrawal' of troops from the country has yet to begin while the administration has pledged to keep up to 50,000 troops beyond the August 2010 deadline. In contrast to the Iraq war, Obama has embraced Afghanistan as his own -- calling it a 'war of necessity', and is stepping up the war effort to such an extent that in spite of talk about an 'exit strategy' it seems nearly impossible for the US to extricate itself from this region in the near future. These continuing wars on the frontiers of the (arguably overextended) 'US empire' are both an indication of the limits of the earlier neoliberal globalization strategy as of its continuing geopolitical interests in these regions. In a context in which US structural power within the global political economy has only been further eroded -- with the neoliberal 'growth model' itself in crisis -- and in which China increasingly seems to present itself as an effective contender of US hegemony, it seems likely that the defence of such geopolitical interests will continue to rely on the use of force.

These are then the structural conditions that the geopolitical strategists of the Obama administration face. These conditions will not determine the strategy but define the limits of the possible. Analysing the dialectical interplay of structure and agency over time we see how the *past* strategies of the neoconservatives have helped to shape the *present* structural context which will require a *different response and strategy* to restore or prolong US primacy. As we have argued, a critical element of such a response, and a necessary one for it to constitute a viable *new hegemonic project* within the US state-society complex, would be a new accumulation strategy or successful growth model as the basis for a new successful geopolitical strategy.

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Notes

¹ The past eight years, sparked by the policies of Bush, have witnessed a widespread debate on the concept of American empire (see, just to mention a few: Cox, 2004; Mann, 2004; Ferguson, 2008). In this article we are agnostic regarding the question whether or not the US constitutes an empire. But with Saull (2008: 311) we argue that: '[t]he denial of empire (...) does not mean the United States is not imperial or imperialist'.

² In his sketchy account of the causes of the rise of this new variety of US imperialism Harvey suggests two explanations. One refers to the abovementioned limits of neoliberalism itself, not just the limits of the neoliberal 'growth model' with the bursting of the dot com bubble but also with respect to a disintegration of US civil society and how '[t]he evil enemy without became the prime force through which to exorcise or tame the devils lurking within' (Harvey, 2003: 17). The other, focusing in particular on the Iraq war, refers to his argument that it is 'all about oil' and the control of the 'global oil spigot' of the Middle East (Ibid.: 19). The latter, however, would suggest clear (US and arguably global) capitalist class interests, even if representing a 'territorial' logic. Here in our view, Harvey's opposition between the two logics of power mystify more than that they clarify.

³ Our neo-Gramscian interpretation as explicated below is next to Jessop (1990) inspired by the so-called *Amsterdam International Political Economy Project* (for an overview see Van Apeldoorn, 2004).

⁴ Surprisingly, given the substantial literature on the policy-making power of the US corporate community (e.g., Domhoff, 2009), there is only little empirical research on the links between capitalist class interests and US foreign policy-making, especially at the level of 'grand strategy'.

⁵ Thus although focusing upon the geopolitical component of hegemonic projects, we still in this article employ the concept of hegemonic project as referring to a *national* programme inasmuch as it is oriented to the advancement of dominant class fractions that seek both elite and popular consent within the *US* – rather than transnational or global – civil society. We thus do not refer to US hegemony as its hegemony within the international system or world order, or the extent to which a particular national hegemonic project has also been articulated transnationally (cf. Van Apeldoorn, 2004). Through our analysis of the linkages to transnational capital we do focus our attention on the transnational constitution of US national projects, but we focus less on its transnational effects; although they are part of the changing strategic context that we describe, a more comprehensive analysis of these dynamics would merit additional research that falls outside the scope of this article.

⁶ I.e.: Board of Directors, Founding Members, signatories and contributors to several key advocacy letters and reports regarding geopolitical strategy.

⁷ Since PNAC affiliation is the selection criterion of the actors, PNAC itself is not included in the analyses and graphs, which makes the fact that the network is fully connected and very dense even more significant.

⁸ It should be noted that since the selection of affiliations in this study stretches over a longer period, interlocking memberships do not necessarily imply *direct interaction* between the actors. Rather it should be interpreted as a shared involvement with a particular ideational legacy, a set of shared ideas and interests, and a more general belonging to the broader community with this particular worldview (episteme). Nonetheless there have been many instances of direct interaction within the network, as can be seen in Graph 2.

⁹ The charting of the actors' corporate affiliations was not based on a prefixed selection but proceeded in an exploratory fashion. Included were e.g. positions at Boards of Directors, Advisory Boards, and CEOs in the period 1989 -- 2003. Since there was no opportunity to interview or survey the actors, only those affiliations could be included which were actually made public, which might make the selection slightly biased. It seems however reasonable to assume that the corporate affiliations that these actors have made public give a robust indication of their corporate involvements and allows us to distinguish some broader trends within the network.

¹⁰ For the sector-classification we followed the *Center for Responsive Politics* (2006), in order to make it consistent with data on campaign support.

¹¹ As a benchmark we took the Fortune 500 notation of the year 2000.

¹² See for overview awarded contracts and grants fiscal years 2003-2004, U.S. Department of State (2006). URL (consulted 21 September 2006): http://www.export.gov/iraq/market_ops/contracts.html, for amounts and corporations see Center for Public Integrity (2009) Windfalls of War. URL (consulted 27 September 2009): <http://www.publicintegrity.org/wow/bio.aspx?act=pro>.

¹³ This policy was effectively put into practice by the US Coalition Provisional Authority under the leadership of Paul Bremer, which between 2003-2004 abolished many tariffs on imports, capped corporate and income tax, and exposed Iraqi firms to free competition which led to general asset-stripping and the closing down of Iraqi firms.

¹⁴ Since membership of the Obama administration was the selection criterion, this affiliation is not included separately, membership of the Obama Campaign and the transition teams are however included.

¹⁵ With regard to the high number of interlocks with the Council on Foreign Relations it must be noted that since nearly the whole American foreign policy elite has a membership of this Council, this does not convey much specific information about this particular network.

¹⁶ It should be noted that we included both past and present corporate ties, hence it is not argued that the corporate ties included here do imply direct conflict of interests. In fact it is common practice to cut all formal ties upon accepting a position in the administration. It does however give a clear indication of the corporate backdrop and the 'epistemic community' of this network.

¹⁷ That the corporate links with the defence sector are less extensive should not necessarily be taken to imply, as shall transpire from the next section, that Obama's strategy is therefore less militaristic. There are also other continuities with Bush that one could point to in this context, such as that Obama kept Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates at the Pentagon.

¹⁸ This conclusion contrasts for instance with the analysis of Domhoff (2009:188-95) who on the basis of 'brief biographical sketches' (Ibid.: 192) contends that the Obama Administration appointees differ from former US administrations because of their relative lack of corporate connections.

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